

Trump Pardons Former Skadden Associate Convicted in Mueller Probe



On Tuesday, President Trump granted clemency to 20 people including Alex van der Zwaan, a former associate at Skadden, Arps, Meagher & Flom. Son-in-law of the Russian billionaire German Khan, Alex van der Zwaan was charged in connection with Robert Mueller's Russia investigation into links between Russia and the Trump campaign.

In February 2018, the Dutch lawyer pleaded guilty to a single count of 'willfully and knowingly' making 'false, fictitious, and fraudulent statements and representations' to the Federal Bureau of Investigation regarding his work at the law firm Skadden, Arps, Meagher & Flom in 2012. The first person to be formally convicted in Mueller's Russia probe, he was given a 30-day prison sentence and was also ordered to pay \$20,000 in fine. Van der Zwaan worked with Trump's former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and former deputy chairman Rick Gates.

In particular, he was charged for lying to federal investigators about his communications with Rick Gates, a former Trump aide who was also the deputy campaign chairman of Trump's 2016 election campaign. Robert Mueller's office accused Van der Zwaan of lying about his conversations with Gates and an unnamed person, 'Person A' regarding a report prepared by the firm Skadden on the controversial trial of a Ukrainian politician. He was also accused of destroying material evidence sought by Mueller's office including a September 2016 email between him and Person A. As per the assessment by Mueller's office, Person A was directly linked to Russian intelligence and was also directly communicating with Gates in September and October 2016.

Before pleading guilty, van der Zwaan also filed a memorandum asking for a lenient sentence, citing the reason that he wanted to be at home for his child's birth. He asked the judge if he could pay an 'appropriate fine' rather than serving a jail term. However, the Dutch lawyer ended up serving a 30-day jail term. Unlike other defendants in the Mueller probe, the Dutch attorney did not sign any agreement for cooperation with Mueller's office.

Alex van der Zwaan was as an associate in the international arbitration team at the London office of Skadden Arps. He worked at Skadden for 10 years before he was fired by the Biglaw firm in 2017 after his name appeared in Mueller's Russia probe. His license to practice law was also canceled by U.K.'S Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal (SDT) and he was ordered to pay fines amounting to \$ 3,878.

Among others who received pardon were three former Republican congressmen including Duncan Hunter, a former California lawmaker who was indicted in August 2018 for accusations relating to misuse of \$200,000 campaign funds for family travels, jewelry, and other personal expenses. His 11 months jail term was due to begin in May this year but was postponed to January 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump also granted pardon to Chris Collins, a former Trump ally and New York congressman who was convicted in 2018 for charges relating to the passing of inside information about a biotechnology company to his family. Former Texas GOP congressman Steve Stockman was also pardoned and his remaining jail term for conviction relating to 23 felony counts was commuted on account of his age and health conditions.

Trump's exercise of the president's broad Constitutional power to pardon has been heavily condemned. He has been also condemned for abusing his presidential power to pardon for showing leniency towards his friends and allies.